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SUBJECT: A SNAPSHOT OF COSTA RICA'S REFUGEE COMMUNITY

1.(U) Summary: Costa Rica is home to approximately 12,000 refugees, the largest refugee population in Central America. The vast majority (roughly 10,000) of Costa Rica's refugees are of Colombian origin, though there are also Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Peruvian refugees, among others. Many refugees have found safety and freedom in Costa Rica, and a number have managed to prosper economically. The majority of refugees have found work through the help of a few organizations working on refugee issues in Costa Rica, though some have faced discrimination due to their refugee status. A new immigration law passed in August 2009 created a separate division within the Department of Immigration to deal with refugee issues. This should improve both the speed and effectiveness of Costa Rican Immigration's refugee administration. End Summary.

Refugee Community

¶2. (U) According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are approximately 11,923 people recognized by the GOCR as refugees in Costa Rica. Refugees typically live in urban areas in Costa Rica's central valley and meld into the local community. The majority of refugees live in the Desamparados district of San Jose, Alajuela and Heredia. Refugees have typically sought work in vocational areas, such as auto mechanics or health and beauty services; they often find work through family and/or friends already residing in the country. The Ministry of Labor's Employment Office, working in conjunction with UNHCR, also assists refugees in finding local employment. Some refugees have also been able to start their own businesses with the help of organizations such as Professional Association for the Promotion of the Poor and at-Risk (APRODE) by qualifying for microcredit loans.

Discrimination

¶3. (U) Refugees and those working within the refugee community often complain of subtle or overt forms of public discrimination. According to UNHCR, it is often difficult for refugees, who carry residency cards which clearly state their refugee status, to find employers willing to hire them. The Israeli Zionist Center of Costa Rica conducted a poll in 2009 that asked Costa Ricans which of a wide group of minorities they found to be the most untrustworthy. Thirty-five percent of those polled stated that they most distrusted Colombians, double the next-highest group (Nicaraguans). As one-third of all Colombians in the country are refugees, it is often difficult to determine whether refugees are discriminated against because they are refugees, or because they are Colombian. Adolescents, in particular, face difficulties assimilating into their new communities.

¶4. (U) In order to help refugees integrate into their communities and soften Costa Ricans' feelings towards refugees, UNHCR, along with a local partner, is conducting an ongoing pro-refugee media campaign. The campaign focuses on changing opinions towards

refugees, and sensitizing Costa Ricans to refugee issues in the community. Information about refugees has been posted on billboards, posters, newspapers, television ads, radio, and other mediums throughout San Jose and other highly populated areas.

Refugee Response

15. (U) There are a number of local or international organizations working to address refugee issues in Costa Rica. UNHCR often leads the local and regional response by working with a number of different local organizations. One of their primary local partners is the Association of International Consultants and Advisors (ACAI), a non-governmental organization. ACAI provides free legal services, psychological consultation, and job-skills training to refugees. UNHCR works with APRODE to set up micro-credit funds targeted towards refugee entrepreneurs. The United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (ONUSIDA) and UNHCR also provide training on HIV prevention and AIDS. They have trained more than 2,500 people in health camps over the past year alone.

16. (U) The Costa Rican government also provides medical assistance, through their social security system, and other benefits to refugees. The local government of Desamparados (which is home to one of the highest concentrations of refugees in the country) has assisted in the establishment of the House of Rights, a center where refugees, nationals, and migrants can come together and receive help in diverse areas, for free.

17. (SBU) Additionally, Post works with the refugee community and their issues, highlighted by the successful implementation of a number of Ambassador's Fund for Refugees/Julia Taft Fund grants. The 2008 project created a new computer training center inside of the House of Rights, which continues to provide internet access, computer skills training, and other workshops to refugees to improve their job skills and employment opportunities. APRODE has also had a 2009 Julia Taft Fund application approved, which will establish a revolving micro-credit fund for female entrepreneurs who had not been eligible for other APRODE funds due to the small size of their businesses.

NEW IMMIGRATION LAW

18. (U) On August 4, 2009 Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly unanimously approved a new immigration law. The new law will not go into effect until six months after publication in the official GOCR gazette. This law enacts a number of badly needed changes to Costa Rica's Immigration Department. The refugee application process in Costa Rica is currently a time-consuming ordeal; the GOCR often takes 6-8 months to rule on an application and has a current backlog of 80 cases on appeal (applicants cannot legally work until their case is approved). This is in part due to the lack of a standing refugee office within the Immigration Department, which complicates both funding and capacity building, as immigration officials frequently rotate responsibilities.

19. (U) The new law should address some of these issues. Chiefly among these is the creation of a separate office to deal specifically with refugee issues. This will include the assignment of specific immigration officials to the refugee office, who will receive special training in refugee processing procedures. The new office will also have its own, separate archives, to easier manage information regarding cases. The law also grants certain additional protections to refugees and clarifies and strengthens the approval and appeal process. Finally, the new law removes or lowers some of the financial costs involved with the refugee application process.

COMMENT

110. (SBU) Costa Rica is a natural harbor for those fleeing persecution in the Americas. Its long history of political stability, economic success, and respect for human rights all make Costa Rica appealing to potential refugees, and we expect the

country to continue to see high numbers of refugees. However, despite the country's lofty record on human rights, Costa Ricans themselves are not immune to personal prejudices. As such, continued work on refugee issues, including continued USG support of the refugee community remains important. We anticipate that the implementation of the new immigration law will have a significant and lasting effect on Costa Rica's administration of the refugee process. Refugees can, and often do, build a new, better life in Costa Rica. However, they often need a helping hand to get there.

BRENNAN